

School choice is the latest battle for liberty: Guest commentary



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By Alan Bonsteel and Larry Sand

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As we approach the birthday of the land of the free and the home of the brave, we have much to be thankful for.

But this year we are especially grateful that the school choice movement has won many victories that embody our All-American values of freedom of speech, freedom of religion and equal opportunity for all.

While charter schools, our public schools of choice, have long flourished in most states, new private school choice programs are now being passed in many of them at an accelerating rate. We currently have 56 different school private choice programs in 28 states and D.C., their number doubling every four years since 2000.

Just a few weeks ago, Nevada passed the nation's first universal choice program, giving almost every child in the state the right to a school chosen by their parents. When Gov. Brian Sandoval signed the bill, it was a reminder that the greatest moments in our nation's history have involved striving for liberty.

The inspiring words of Abraham Lincoln in the midst of the Civil War, when he spoke of “... a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created free and equal,” embody the fundamental value of the school choice movement. The overarching tenet that undergirds this movement is that the poor as well as the rich shall get to choose the best school for their children.

Sixteen days after D-Day, President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law our nation’s first voucher program, the G.I. Bill of Rights, and honored the returning soldiers with public funding of their choice of college.

In 1972, federal scholarships — which came to be known as Pell Grants — were instituted. More than five million students can use their grants at any one of more than 5,000 colleges, many of which are private and religious institutions.

In 1991, Polly Williams, an African-American welfare mother of four, led the battle in Milwaukee for our nation’s first voucher program, which, with the help of Republican Gov. Tommy Thompson, passed in the Wisconsin legislature with bipartisan support. The across-the-aisle aspect of choice continues today. At a recent pro-school choice conference, Democrats including strategist James Carville and former D.C. mayor Anthony Williams shared a stage with Republican governors and presidential hopefuls Bobby Jindal and Scott Walker. Jindal summed up the event by saying, “This shouldn’t be a Republican or Democratic issue, this should be an American issue.”

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, comprised mostly of poor and minority students, was established in 2004. Today it boasts a 91 percent graduation rate for participants, compared to just 70 percent for kids in public schools.

Parents are still battling for liberty when it involves their kids’ schooling. But today’s conflict is not with a monarch, but rather the teachers unions and other entrenched special interests that refuse to cede any ground in their grip on the government monopoly. One of their rallying cries is that public dollars should not go to religious schools, though they support Pell Grants which are nothing more than vouchers on the college level. Additionally, in 2002 the Supreme Court ruled in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* that because educational funding goes to the parents and not the school, it in no way breaches the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

Our Statue of Liberty is engraved with words that greet immigrants to our shores: “I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” That door has begun to open for more than immigrants. As school choice spreads across the land, both immigrant and native born, rich and poor, black and white, special ed and gifted — everyone — will benefit as all parents will be empowered to make the best educational choices for their children. Freedom of school choice is quintessentially American. And We, the People, are making it a reality in our time.

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